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It takes two

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Ernest TING

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IT TAKES TWO

✦ *Faye Sit and Ernest Ting of Hook Coffee contemplate Singapore's service standards and if the Singapore market is ready for better service.*



Does Singapore lack good service? We've just asked co-founders Faye Sit and Ernest Ting of Hook Coffee to weigh in on the matter, and from their laughter it's clear the two have discussed this before. "It's a chicken and egg issue," Faye says, while Ernest chimes in. "It takes two hands to clap."

It's an interesting take on a hotly debated question. It's also a rarely articulated perspective: many of us think of service within the confines of service delivery, but Faye and Ernest have broadened the discussion to raise issues like customer reception and responsibility.

Shaped by their personal experience of receiving excellent customer service while living overseas, Faye and Ernest were determined to build their coffee subscription business beyond mere product; excellent service was also a founding business belief. But while their service philosophy opened

doors, it also quickly found a group of customers that forced the company to tighten its generous policies. We speak to them about their lessons.

You guys started Hook Coffee after returning from London. Why the idea?

Ernest (E): I studied in the UK and gained an interest in specialty coffee. I wanted to strike out on my own after I graduated and do something I was passionate about. There were a lot of subscription companies in the UK at that time but no coffee subscription in Singapore, so I roped Faye in.

Faye (F): I actually told Ernest I would only join him if we focused on sustainable coffees. I think offering a product with traceability is a big part of customer service. People want to know where the goods they're consuming come from.

We also used a few subscription services in the UK and thought they provided really good service. If there was something about my order I didn't like, I knew I could contact them and they would get back to me really quickly and politely. We thought that was lacking in Singapore: we found that if you try to call someone on the phone here, it's first hard to reach them, and when you do reach them they're not very polite. So our philosophy also became about providing really good customer service.



Has that been a challenge to achieve here?

E: It is. We try to deliver great customer service, but Singapore customers can be difficult to deal with.

How so?

E: We have a no commitment policy, which drives a lot of benefit seekers. These subscribers tend to abuse the system. They're sometimes also verbally abusive.

When we were in the UK, we found that people willingly wrote reviews when they liked a product. The culture here is different: people like to write bad reviews, but very few write good reviews — even if they like the product! There has to be an incentive in order to get most of our customers to write reviews.

F: Consumers here like to see what their friends or bloggers are saying, or what's on social media, so customer service is often overlooked here.



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E: This isn't that prevalent in UK or Europe where service is a priority.

F: Yeah, Singaporeans are very informed consumers when it comes to researching products before they buy. Before they go out with friends, they look for the best places to eat at. They're driven by trends and good deals.

E: They're driven by reviews.

But you also have a loyal customer base despite these challenges.

F: Yes, we have customers we've built rapport with through personal engagement. We realised there were certain customers who were ordering a lot of coffee, so we would send them personal messages to thank them for supporting us or sometimes give them surprise freebies.

As an online company, it's difficult to get face-to-face interaction, but our loyal customers come down to say hi when we pop-up around Singapore. We take photos with them; we talk to them. Sometimes we get to know new customers at pop-ups, so we remember their names and faces from day one. When they order online we make sure to send them a personal message.

We also use technology to get to know our customers better. We designed a recommendation engine on our website because specialty coffee is still quite new here and many people don't know how to choose their coffees. The engine has 95% accuracy on which coffee we think a customer will like from our range, so we know their preferences from the start. They're subsequently able to rate the coffees they receive. We use this information to send them new products we think they will enjoy.



And you also work with corporate clients. How's that like?

F: It's a whole different ball game. B2B customers are more concerned with costs, so we first have to provide an attractive price. Maintaining the relationship isn't as difficult because they're not as fickle as B2C customers. So for direct customers you have to spend more energy retaining them, but for corporate clients you have to invest in acquiring them.

E: We conduct quality control checks for B2B clients each month, but for direct customers it really comes down to their individual orders. When we first started the business it was all about acquiring customers, but the focus also expanded to retaining them.

F: Yeah, we had customers who had been with us for some time and others only for a short while. We started to see that it wasn't efficient to communicate with them in the same approach, so we developed a roadmap for working with our B2C customers through feedback forms that we incentivised customers to fill out by crediting them with points in their accounts.

The roadmap ensures customers are engaged at different junctures of their customer experience.

How do you think service here fares in comparison to other countries?

E: I think online service is better than brick-and-mortar service, partly because the online companies are younger start-ups that tend to pay more attention to service.

But brick-and-mortar service in Singapore is really bad. You go to a nice restaurant and they don't serve you well. They don't smile; they drop the plate on the table. I rarely leave a restaurant impressed by the service, but I'm often impressed in London or even around Asia. You can go to a fast food chain there and they take the time to talk to you. Faye and I always wonder whether it's a problem with the service or the customers.

How do you think we can improve?

F: Service providers can go the extra mile to make customers feel valued by showing empathy and being helpful to understand and resolve the customer's issues. They should be friendly and positive, and take customer feedback seriously by taking actions to improve. Knowing and remembering individual customers' preferences also allows them to feel special.

We hope that customers remember that those working in the service line are human too. Treating others with respect, being polite and friendly, and showing appreciation can go a long way in encouraging service providers to consistently practise quality service. ✦